

PROGRESS IN ATHENS COUNTY 2006

This Bush Gnome has an ax to grind

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Ohio University professor Sam Girton, creator of the increasingly popular George W. Bush yard gnome, is releasing his third model, Bush Gnome 3.0, within the next few months.

Girton came up with the initial concept in the spring before the 2004 presidential election. He said he was looking at political cartoons, and "Bush was always depicted with pointy ears. I thought he looked like a garden gnome."

Girton, an associate professor in the School of Visual Communication, decided he wanted to make himself a Bush lawn gnome so he contracted local artist Sandy Plunket to sketch the gnome. Then Girton sent it to Philadelphia-based ceramicist Erin Payne to create the mold. After he saw the 10-inch, hand-painted finished product, he said he knew other people would want one of these gnomes. Since then, the lo-

cal business has taken off.

Girton has ingeniously constructed his gnomes to be politically neutral, with buyers generally projecting their own feelings about Bush onto the gnome. He stressed that his customers are both pro-Bush and anti-Bush. "They [customers] are usually 50/50," said Girton.

Bush Gnome 1.0 had his fingers crossed behind his back and could, according to Girton, symbolize either lucky Bush to his supporters or lying Bush to his critics. The original Bush Gnome 1.0 is now retired; however, Girton said they are selling for \$60 (double their original price) on eBay.

For Bush Gnome 2.0, Girton offered a variety of George W. Bush options; traditional, patriotic and military Bush Gnomes all held the American flag as an accessory.

For the revamped Bush Gnome 3.0, Bush is depicted leaning on an axe with a tree stump next to him. Girton said the figure remains non-partisan because Bush supporters could perceive the collectible as "I

cannot tell a lie" (George Washington's fable) while Bush critics could interpret it as a symbol of deforestation.

The gnomes can be purchased online at www.bushgnome.com or at the Import House in Athens.

To connect with fans and customers, Girton recently held a Bush Gnome accessory contest where anyone could send in a photo of his or her Bush Gnome holding a clever accessory. The contest is being judged by MTV Networks' Creative Services Director Mark Malabrigo. The winner will receive \$500, and his or her winning accessory will be posted on the Web site and probably become available for other Bush Gnome owners to use with the 2.0 version, Girton said.

Bush Gnomes have gotten wide circulation in the mass media of late, seen on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and even newspapers in Argentina and Brazil, among others.

The gnomes may have even



The newest version of Sam Girton's Bush Gnome.

made their way into Washington, D.C. Girton said he heard that a personal friend of the president residing in Cincinnati heard about the gnomes and drove to Buckeye Stoneware in Zanesville, Ohio (where they are produced) to buy two for the president when he made a stop in Ohio.

Girton also gave a White House photographer (a former student) a gnome to give to the president.

When asked if he knew if President Bush was aware of his garden gnome, Girton replied, "I know he does."

After the current president's term, Girton said he may still make political gnomes of Dick Cheney or Hillary Clinton, though he's not certain.

Girton said he sold about 5,000 of Version 1.0 before retiring it, then 500-1,000 of Version 2.0.